German food

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German cuisine is generally regarded as being rich, stodgy and filling: meat, dark bread and potatoes, washed down with beer. Although nowadays German food has been considerably broadened by trade networks and foreign influences, traditional fare still holds a special place in the German nation's heart. So, what's cooking in Germany's kitchen?

A brief history of German food

The typical German diet makes much more sense if you examine it in its historical context. Before trade routes and immigration transformed mealtimes all over the world, Germans were limited to what it was possible to grow locally. In contrast to the Mediterranean, the relatively cold German weather produced a diet rich in grains, dairy and meat. The long winter meant that food preserving techniques such as salting, pickling, smoking and curing became crucial to making food stocks last.

The impact of trade and immigration on German food

Gradually over time, the German diet broadened. The Romans introduced vineyards and fruit orchards. Cities such as Cologne grew into important trading centres and were introduced to exotic and foreign foods like spices.

In the wake of the First World War, an influx of Italian ice-cream makers arrived in Germany, bringing with them dishes such as pizza and pasta that have since become staples of the German diet. From the 1960s onwards, new arrivals from Turkey, China, Vietnam, Greece and the former Soviet Union all began to put their own stamp on German cuisine.

Michelin stars and Imbiss bars

Although its culinary horizons have thus considerably broadened, culinary heritage is still in evidence in modern-day Germany. Traditional meals typically consist of meat, potatoes and bread, although many chefs have begun to experiment with serving traditional fare in new ways.

Although Germany may not be regarded as the home of haute cuisine, it is (perhaps surprisingly) not far behind Italy and France when it comes to Michelin stars. As well as fancy restaurants, it offers a plethora of more low-key eateries, kebab shops and Imbiss (snack) stands to suit all tastes and budgets.

Traditional German food

Do you know your *Brezel* from your *Pumpernickel* and your *Apfelschorle* from your *Apfeltorte*? What on earth is an *Eintopf* and where does *Schnitzel* really come from?

German cuisine may not be particularly well-regarded worldwide, but what it lacks in refinement it more than makes up for in flavour and heartiness. Here is an overview of some traditional German dishes you are likely to encounter in Germany:

Eintopf

Literally translated as "one pot", *Eintopf* is a simple stew that is, as the name suggests, prepared in a single dish. It generally consists of a combination of broth, vegetables, potatoes and meat or sausages.

The dish was popularised by the Nazi party in their "*Eintopfsonntag*" campaign that encouraged Germans to eschew the traditional Sunday roast dinner in favour of a thriftier one-pot meal and set the savings aside for charity. Despite this unsavoury association, the *Eintopf* remains a popular traditional dish in Germany.

Erbsensuppe (pea soup)

Erbsensuppe - or pea soup - is a thick, hearty soup made from split peas, potatoes, ham hock and Frankfurter sausages. It is usually eaten steaming hot with a thick slice of bread and butter.

An especially popular dish in Germany in the winter months, it is often sold by street vendors, particularly at *Karneval* celebrations in Cologne, Mainz and Düsseldorf. Scooping up hot spoonfuls whilst shivering in sub-zero temperatures, it'll be the most delicious thing you've ever tasted.

Bratwurst

You can't talk about German food without mentioning sausages! The history of the *Bratwurst* in Germany stretches all the way back to 1313, when the council in Nuremberg stipulated that only pork loin meat was to be used in sausage-making. Although there are now as many as 40 different varieties of German *Bratwurst*, the recipe has barely changed in 700 years.

Bratwurst are typically served by street vendors in a white bread roll with ketchup or mustard. They may also be served in restaurants, often with potato salad and *Sauerkraut*.

Read about the Bratwurst's cousin, the *Currywurst*, below.

Leberkäse

Although it translates as “liver cheese”, *Leberkäse* is actually a mixture of finely-ground pork, beef or liver (and sometimes all three). Vaguely reminiscent of meatloaf, it is typically pressed into a bread tin and then baked to form a crunchy brown crust.

Leberkäse in Germany must, by law, contain at least 4 percent liver (5 percent in Stuttgart). However, an exception is made for Bavaria, where *Leberkäse* can be produced that doesn’t contain liver.

Schnitzel

Germany’s favourite - and most famous - dish is not actually German. It’s not even Austrian! Its convoluted history can be traced from Vienna to Milan, where locals learnt it from Spanish soldiers, who got it from the Arabs, who apparently brought it from the Byzantine empire...

Whatever its origins, the moral of the story is that everyone likes *Schnitzel*: a tender, boneless piece of meat (most often pork), breaded, fried and served with a wedge of lemon. *Wiener Schnitzel* is made with veal while *Jägerschnitzel* (hunter's’ schnitzel) comes with a mushroom sauce.

Rouladen

They may sound French, but *Rouladen* - rolls of thinly-sliced beef stuffed with pork, onions and pickles - are a German classic. Once assembled, the rolls are browned in a pan and then braised in red wine and broth.

Although at one time *Rouladen* were considered part of an everyday meal, nowadays they are usually only eaten on special occasions (perhaps because they are quite a faff to make!) They are usually served with either potato dumplings or mashed potato and plenty of gravy.

Flammkuchen

Germany’s answer to French Tartiflette, *Flammkuchen* (“flame cake”) is a cross between a pizza and a flatbread: a thin, crispy base topped with creme fraiche, bacon and onions. One of Germany’s favourite dishes, it’s so good that the Alsace and Saarland regions often squabble over who invented it.

Although some eateries in Germany may experiment with different toppings and vegetarian versions, there isn't really any need to reinvent the wheel when *Flammkuchen's* original iteration is sheer perfection. Shared between friends, it's the perfect snack to accompany a cold glass of German white wine.

Brezeln (pretzels)

Forget those little pretzels you get in snack packets from the supermarket - these are the real thing: chewy, bagel-like bread, shaped into a loop and covered with salt. Although accounts regarding the origin of pretzels vary enormously, they tend to agree that they were invented by European monks and that the characteristic knot shape has some sort of religious significance.

Brezeln have been part of German baking traditions for centuries, to the extent that the pretzel is used as the emblem for bakers in southern Germany. The shape and exact recipe of pretzels varies considerably across Germany; savoury ones are typically eaten as a snack or, in Munich and the rest of Bavaria, as an accompaniment to a main meal.

Pumpernickel

Everyone knows the Germans are serious about their bread, and *Pumpernickel* is a serious kind of bread. A dense rye bread made with a sourdough starter, its name reputedly refers to the fact that it is hard to digest: *pumpern* in old Westphalian means "to break wind".

While most varieties of black bread (*Schwarzbrot*) are baked, *Pumpernickel* is steamed at a low temperature for anywhere up to 24 hours, resulting in the bread's characteristic dark colour. *Pumpernickel* can typically be eaten at most meals - with cold meats and cheeses for breakfast, as an accompaniment to a hot lunchtime meal, or as part of a light dinner.

Bratkartoffeln (fried potatoes)

Delicious waxy, yellow potatoes, fried in butter with bacon pieces and caramelised onion: German food doesn't get much better than *Bratkartoffeln*. They are often served as an accompaniment to *Schnitzel* or other meat dishes.

Bratkartoffeln aren't just popular in Germany: as early as 1870, "German fries" were appearing on American and British menus. The story goes, however, that animosity towards anything "German" during the Second World War caused the rejection of German fries in favour of the Allied equivalent: French fries.

Sauerkraut

It may be the dish most stereotypically associated with Germany, and historically given rise to some unpleasant nicknames, but *Sauerkraut* (a kind of pickled, fermented cabbage) does not actually hail from Germany. It is thought to have been brought to Europe from China, where they fermented cabbage with rice wine.

Sauerkraut has been a popular staple of the German diet since at least the 17th century. Recently, it has experienced a revival as a purported health food. Made by layering finely-shredded cabbage with salt and leaving it to ferment, *Sauerkraut* is a popular accompaniment to many traditional German dishes.

Regional speciality dishes in Germany

Although there are many traditional dishes that can be found all over Germany, there is also a great deal of regional variation. This is largely due to the fact that Germany as a country is still relatively young: prior to its unification in 1871, it was made up of a number of independent kingdoms and principalities who had their own dialects, customs and, of course, cuisine. Here is an overview of some typical local dishes in different German cities and federal states.

Currywurst

Currywurst may be somewhat looked down upon by Berlin's residents, but the city can't entirely turn its back on its most popular invention. Indeed, some 70 million *Currywurst* are sold in Berlin each year, and not just to tourists: a 2008 study reported that 80 percent of Germans consider *Currywurst* a staple of their diet.

The story goes that, one day in 1949, a woman named Herta Heuwer managed to procure some curry powder from British troops in Berlin. Back at her snack stand, she mixed the spice with some ketchup, added a dash of salt, sugar and Worcestershire sauce, and just like that, the *Currywurst* was born. Today there are thousands of

snack stands all over Germany selling the tasty sausages, usually sliced and accompanied with fries or a bread roll.

Reibekuchen mit Apfelmus

In the rest of Germany these potato fritters are known as "*Kartoffelpuffer*" and served as a savoury accompaniment to a meal. In the Rhineland and particularly Cologne, however, they are called "*Reibekuchen*" and served sweet, with a sprinkling of icing sugar and a dollop of apple sauce (*Apfelmus*). They are made from finely-grated potato that is mixed with egg, onion and flour and then fried until golden.

You can most commonly find *Reibekuchen* at food stands at outdoor festivals, particularly during the Christmas market season, when the low temperatures make sinking your teeth into a steaming hot potato cake an absolute delight.

Stollen

Although it can be found all over Germany, especially around Christmas time, *Stollen* has a long historical connection with Dresden, having been baked there since at least 1474. Traditionally associated with Christmas, *Stollen* is a cake-like bread made sweet with candied peels, raisins, almonds and spices. Some varieties have a rope of marzipan running down the centre. Once baked, the cake is lathered in melted butter and rolled in icing sugar to make it keep better.

In 1560, the bakers of Dresden gifted each of the rulers of Saxony a Christmas *Stollen* cake weighing 16 kilograms! To this day, Dresden hosts an annual *Stollen* festival, the highlight of which is a giant *Stollen* cake, weighing between three and four tonnes. The cake is paraded through the city before being ceremonially cut into pieces (using a 1,6 metre-long knife!) and handed out to the crowd.

Halve Hahn

The dish that has made many-a tourist tickle their head in puzzlement, the *Halve Hahn* (half rooster) actually has nothing to do with chicken. It is a simple dish, consisting of half a rye roll, butter, a slice of cheese (either Mainz or Gouda), mustard, onions and pickles. In Düsseldorf, it is traditionally served in pubs as an accompaniment to *Altbier*.

The origin of the name itself is disputed, but one story goes that it was coined by a man named Wilhelm Vierkötter, who at a birthday party in 1877 played a prank on his guests: he ordered 14 half roast chickens, but secretly arranged for the waiter to serve 14 half-rolls with cheese instead.

Grüne Soße

Frankfurt's speciality - and reportedly Goethe's favourite sauce - *Grüne Soße* (green sauce) is a mixture of sour cream, oil, vinegar, mustard, hard-boiled eggs and seven herbs (parsley, chives, chervil, cress, borage, sorrel and salad burnet). People in Frankfurt can't get enough of it! The sauce has been awarded protected status within the EU and there is even a monument dedicated to it in Frankfurt-Oberrad.

Green sauce, known as "*Grie Soß"* in Frankfurt dialect, is usually served cold, with boiled potatoes and hard-boiled eggs. It is also sometimes used as an accompaniment to fish, asparagus or roast beef. It even finds its way into some Schnitzel dishes - *Frankfurter Schnitzel* is a local speciality.

Labskaus

Don't let the appearance of Germany's most unphotogenic food put you off - *Labskaus* is hearty and delicious. Created by sailors in the 16th century as a way to make their salted meat rations go further, it has since become a typical dish served up by eateries in Hamburg.

Traditionally, *Labskaus* is made by boiling salted meat or corned beef and mincing it with onions, boiled potatoes and beetroot, which gives it its characteristic bright red hue. It is typically served with gherkins and pickled herring, topped with a fried egg, and is generally regarded by the strong-stomached as a good hangover cure.

Prinzregententorte

The *Prinzregententorte* (prince regent torte) is the jewel in the crown of the coffee and cake tradition in Munich. It was originally invented in 1886 by Georg Erbshäuser to honour the Prince Regent Luitpold. Although he was very popular with the Bavarian population, Luitpold wasn't actually king; he was just taking care of the throne for his uncle Ludwig II (the "Mad King" responsible for fairytale German castles like Neuschwanstein).

Prinzregententorte is made by layering seven thin sponge cakes with chocolate buttercream, before topping with apricot jam. The whole cake is then encased with a dark chocolate glaze. Originally, the cake had eight layers, to symbolise the eight districts of the former Kingdom of Bavaria. However, when one of these regions was subsumed into Rhineland-Palatinate after the Second World War, it was also removed from the cake, resulting in seven layers.

Maultaschen

Think of *Maultaschen* as ravioli, German-style: pasta squares the size of your palm, stuffed with meat, spinach, bread crumbs and onions. The name is thought to derive from the German words for “animal mouth” and “bag”, meaning the name’s literal translation is “feedbag” - probably a reference to the pasta parcel’s appearance.

Maultaschen are a Swabian speciality, especially popular in Stuttgart. They can either be served in broth or fried in butter. According to legend, the dish was created by a monk as a way to surreptitiously eat meat during lent, by concealing it inside pasta dough. For this reason, a Swabian nickname for the dish is *Herrgottbescheißerle* (“small God-cheaters”)!

Spätzle

Spätzle - a type of pasta or dumpling - is a very popular dish in southern Germany, especially in the Swabian regions of Baden-Württemberg. The name is derived from the diminutive form of the Swabian word “*Spatz*”, and therefore translates literally as “little sparrows”, a reference to the pasta’s shape. In certain regions, it is also known as *Knöpfle* (“little buttons”).

Spätzle is made using a combination of eggs, flour and salt. Tradition states that you use one more egg than the number of people eating. It is usually served as an accompaniment to gravy-rich dishes, either plain, cooked in cheese (*Käsespätzle*) or mixed with liver (*Leberspätzle*).

German breakfast

Breakfast is taken quite seriously as a meal in Germany - especially on the weekend when it can sometimes feel like the whole country is heading out for brunch! Although

during the week plenty of people wolf down a bowl of cereal or muesli before work, on weekends German breakfasts take a more leisurely pace.

Breakfasts in Germany usually include fresh rolls served with butter, jam and marmalade, boiled eggs, cheeses and cold cuts of meat like ham and salami. On the side, most people have a hot drink like tea or coffee, and perhaps a glass of orange juice.

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